

THE LEGACY OF JANATAR MANCHA

SHAKHAWAT LITON

In UK the ministerial code says a minister of the government must uphold the political impartiality of the civil service and not ask civil servants to act in a way which would conflict with the civil service code. Also, a minister has a duty to ensure that influence over civil service and public appointment is not abused for partisan purposes. The ministerial code specifies other conducts of a minister. Therefore, a minister cannot act on his whims or arrogance. Thus, the government of UK, the birthplace of the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy, tries to ensure high standards of ministers' conduct.

Our government feels happy to claim that we are following the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy. But they do not speak for a ministerial code as the lack of a code allows ministers to enjoy unfettered freedom. A minister does not need to think much about things like the code of conduct. They can easily resort to influence on the civil servants for personal and partisan purposes. This practice has been taking place over the years, excessively politicizing the civil administration. In view of a senior civil servant who is in the service "the situation is now so bad that an honest officer finds it difficult to act professionally. If he remains rigid to professionalism, he faces risk of harassment or embarrassment in

service."

In the politicised administration, some officers fail to get undue benefits by maintaining good relations which is beyond professionalism with the government, ministers and ruling party policymakers. They get punished as they are either made OSD [officers on special duty] or denied promotions. They wait for a change of government; some of them try to maintain clandestine links with the opposition leaders.

The December 4 meeting between BNP chief Khaleda Zia and some current and former government officials at her Gulshan office should not be treated as a sporadic incident. It is a manifestation of the excessive politicisation of the civil administration. Immediately after the meeting, BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir claimed that there was no currently serving government official in the meeting. In a press statement issued by the BNP also claimed that those who

were present at the meeting were retired government officials. But the media reports said something else. According to newspaper reports some officials and employees present at the meeting are still in the service. And the BNP planned to take mileage from the excessive politicisation of the administration by banking on the officials who are currently not in the

BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir claimed that there was no currently serving government official in the meeting.

government's "good books". The BNP leaders had sought to involve the civil service officials and employees in the agitation against the government.

The success of the Janatar Mancha in 1996 has inspired the BNP leaders willing to engage the government officials in the anti-government movement. The then opposition Awami League was immensely benefited by the government officials who joined the Janatar Mancha to intensify the street agitation against the then BNP-led government. And

officials held a secret meeting at Uttara with BNP leader Mahmudur Rahman to influence the then parliamentary election. The incident was probed. Later some officials were sent on retirement. But no other legal action was taken against them. The fate of the officials joining the Uttara meeting could have been different had the BNP returned to the power in 2008 election.

After the secret meeting in Gulshan, the government has announced that it would take stern action



Sheikh Hasina



Khaleda Zia

the then BNP-led government formed after the February 15 controversial election, collapsed. The AL formed the government winning the June 1996 election. The AL-led government rewarded some of the officials who led the revolt in the civil administration. One such official was even inducted in the council of ministers of the then AL-led government.

The BNP, after returning to power in October 2001, had moved to take punitive measures against the leaders who had led the officials to join the Janatar Mancha. It filed cases. But the then BNP government were not very efficient in pursuing the cases. Finally, the cases were withdrawn by the AL-led government in March 2009, freeing the accused in the Janatar Mancha, leaving a negative impact on the civil administration.

Another incident took place at the end of 2006 during the caretaker government-led by then President Iajuddin Ahmed. Some government

against the officials who joined the meeting. Some actions may be taken to discourage others to join such a meeting in future. But this will not address the invasive culture of politicizing the civil administration. All the successive governments have politicised the administration for petty partisan interests. Of them the military rulers blatantly abused the civil servants to form and strengthen their political parties. The current AL-led government must take a crucial political decision that it would not abuse the civil administration for partisan purposes. It should deliver on its electoral pledge to keep the civil administration free from politicisation. The government should also consider formulation of a ministerial code to discourage ministers from influencing the civil servants for their political purposes. A strong and professional bureaucracy free from politicisation is one of the crucial elements for the survival of democracy.